

Feast of the Epiphany - Sermon

Today we are celebrating the feast of the Epiphany, the traditional ending of the Christmas season - the Feast of the Three Kings; the Feast of the Magi; the Feast of the Wise Men. It's a feast with many names. And there is a certain sadness in ending this "joyous season".

As we read in the gospel story, three kings follow a star; come to Bethlehem to adore Jesus; present the infant Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; having come from Arabia, Babylon and Egypt; and bearing the names of Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar - although these are not mentioned in the Gospel story itself and are part of a later tradition. And then having had a not-so-nice interaction with King Herod they return to their homes.

Matthew seems to have started his "memoirs" of Jesus with this opening scene in order to form an inclusion with his gospel closing scene. At the end of the gospel you will find the scene of what has been called the Great Commission ... Jesus appears to his disciples after the Resurrection and just before he departs he commands that they should "Go out and preach to all nations, baptizing them etc."

In other words we are viewing part of Matthew's particular theology where the Jesus movement is now seen as simply NOT to the Jewish people or the peoples of Israel, especially after the fall of Jerusalem; but has now acquired a universal aspect. And so these opening and closing scenes highlight this universal goal.

What's more interesting is that Matthew's story is not the only version of the Magi. There is a document called "The Revelation of the Magi" which tells of TWELVE magi who follow a star and come and visit the child. In fact, if you go to the Metropolitan Museum and look at their Christmas tree you will see a number of kings arranged in the display. This became normal in the Neopolitan versions of the Creche scene, reflecting this alternative story.

In the version found in "The Revelation of the Magi" we find twelve sons of kings, who were descendants of a group of mystics descendants of Seth,

the 3rd son of Adam and Eve. These “silent ones”, as they are called, have kept alive a prophecy that at some time in the future God would become man and his coming would be signaled by the appearance of a star. And so now that the star has appeared 12 of the sons of the kings of these “silent ones” travel to Jerusalem and like Matthew’s story visit King Herod and then go to Bethlehem to honor the child born of the star. Here there is no mention of gifts; but after paying him homage they return to their home, that is from “East of the world inhabited by human beings at the Ocean, the great sea beyond the world, east of the land of Nod, that place in which dwelt Adam, head and chief of all the families of the world”, interpreted to mean China. Later, they then are visited by the Apostle Thomas who baptizes them in the Christian religion and forms a Christian community.

Some observations. Why twelve? It seems that it’s rooted in the fact that the Feast of the Epiphany is in fact twelve days from Christmas - the familiar Christmas carol. Which in turn seems to be connected to the idea of twelve apostles and twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve has taken on special meaning in Christian stories.

The original document seems to have been written somewhere at the end of the second century beginning of the third, so not at the same time as Matthew’s story, but still seen as a further development of that tradition. Actually the final part of the story, the arrival of Thomas, seems to be a sixth century addition. Again, as in the case of most of the ancient documents associated with Christianity, this one too has been studied and analyzed.

The kings here are also named in the story. It’s a rather interesting list of tongue-twisters: Zaharwandad, Hormizd, Austazp, Arsak, Zarwand, Ariho, Artahsisat, Astanbozan, Mihruq, Ahsiras, Nasardih, and Merodak.

It’s all seems to be expansion of the story associated with the Epiphany; created actually to fill in the story found in Matthew; as in the case of other documents which expand the Lukan story of Mary and the birth in the stable.

But here is the question and why I’m bringing this up. Aren’t they both “stories”? aren’t they both “folk tales”? QUESTION: is there any value for us in these stories?

YES. It reminds us that the New Testament, the books we ended up putting into our Bible were also written around this time and also contain folk tales, stories, sermons and lessons. You might say it's simply a matter of degree to which you ACCEPT, the stories in Mark, Luke, Matthew and John and not in these other writings. But they all have the same base root

Let me illustrate with an interesting example of this deeper "rootedness". Here is a question: Who was Jesus? The earliest answer we have is found in Paul's letters. And would you believe, Paul never claims Jesus to be divine; he never calls him God. For Paul, Jesus is the NEW ADAM. That is the basis of his Christology.

And it's interesting to note that in this work, the Revelation of the Magi, that we have a prophecy that is also rooted in looking at Adam and the promise to Seth of a new creation, God becoming man, signaled by the appearance of a star. Both of these are born out of the same older more ancient perspective. What you might call "Adam theology".

So why am I bringing this all up? Because in 2017 we will be celebrating the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Pope Francis has already marked this in going to Sweden at the end of October and commemorating the event with the Lutheran Church there.

The problem, however is that Martin Luther himself was a "nut case", in the sense that he was burdened with this great sense of guilt and shame. In his own writing he attests to how he was so tormented with this guilt and it will be this inner psychological realm that will determine his ideas, his actions and his writing. And to put it one way, he was not a "healthy" person.

And it was out of this personal angst that he posted his thesis and began the reformation.

Of course, this is what was needed at the time. He was "the right person at the right time". But It is interesting that he will turn to Paul (who was a nut case) and then Augustine (who was also a nut case) to come up with his later theology.

They all come from the same personal psychological persona - a personal experience of guilt and angst and will build a whole theology and version of Christianity based on this "inner experience" of theirs and will become such an influence on the later development of Christianity

I believe we should commemorate the Protestant Reformation but remembering also that the PROTESTANT REFORMATION HIGHLIGHTED TWO GREAT ERRORS:

The FIRST ERROR was the idea that "the Church" defined as "the priest". From the time of Constantine through the middle ages the Church became a social hierarchy saturated with what would become called clericalism, most highly symbolized by the Pope, called Satan by the Reformers at this time.

Luther's attacks were valid. Clericalism was rampant and the Church in his day really had little to do with Jesus or Christianity, as other accepted (Franciscans/Dominicans) and non-accepted (Cathars) reform movements indicated.

But SECOND ERROR was Luther's counter proposal, "the Church" defined as "the Bible". In order to combat this clericalism he chose to rely on THE BIBLE. As he would proclaim, only if it was in THE BIBLE would he accept some idea, some practice, some ritual. So he switched from 'dependence on the priests' to 'dependence on the book'

BOTH ARE WRONG

Christianity is not "the religion of the priests"

Christianity is not "the religion of the Bible"

What Luther didn't comprehend or appreciate is that the Bible was created by the priests, back in the 4th century. In fact, the Bible did not exist prior to 325 AD. The oldest copy we have is the codex Sinaiticus dating to 350 AD which seems to have been a part of a request by Constantine to create 50 Bibles that would then become the "rule of the land" as the textual source for christianity and what we would call the "Canon of the Bible". But prior to this there was NO BIBLE. There were various works, letters, gospels, revelations, sermons, etc. We have them now, hundred of documents. And

it was only with Constantine and the creation of “the book”, that is, a selection of these various works into one compilation, that we have the Bible.

And even here, with lots of qualifications because it’s not the same as the Bible we have today. There were other books in codes Sinaiticus that we don’t have now; and others which were not in those sanctioned by Constantine, but are now in the Bible.

It’s all rather complicated, meaning that the idea of depending on the Bible as the root source of christianity has its own set of problems ; as is depending on the Vatican or “the priests” for that understanding.

LET ME PICTURE THIS:

Let’s say the year is 130 AD, the 100th year anniversary of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are in Antioch, we are at a Eucharistic celebration. What is going on?

People gather singing one of the Psalms of David (although not collected yet in one book yet; but with many available for use by this earliest of Christian communities). They then proceed with a Synagogue Service. They read from the Torah (the Law - what we now call the Pentateuch); they read from the Prophets (generally from Isaiah, Daniel or Ezekiel); they then read from either one of Paul’s letters (if they have any copies of them); and then from the “Memoirs of the Apostles” (which could have been any of about 25 different documents). Then would come a sermon designed to extol and encourage people on how to live out their christian lives. There would NOT have been any doctrine teaching. That didn’t exist yet. The Nicene Creed we are familiar with will not be created for another two hundred years. Rather there would have been EXHORTATIONS on “The Way” - how to be a follower of Jesus. They then would have had supper and would have blessed bread and blessed a cup of wine as part of that meal; like what we have done in the past at our Anniversary Dinner and as described in the Didache Document

There was NOT a Bible to read from; there was not a New Testament to read from - that wouldn't have existed for another 250 years; and actually officially not existed in the Catholic Church until the council of trent in 1635

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN:

Unfortunately we have fallen into the trap. We have accepted Luther's claim that we must depend on the Bible for understanding who Jesus was, what he said and what it means to be a Christian and only there.

And that is WRONG!

We do have the Bible, a library of sources to turn to, to read, to study; but not as the ultimate source for understanding Christianity, but rather to see how people and communities lived, understood who Jesus was and defined what it means to be a Christian ... in the past. But we also have other literature, hundreds and hundreds of other documents, that we can also look to and study and learn from; and especially since many of these other works would influence how Christianity developed through the ages; as is evidenced in the case of today's Feast of the Epiphany

And we do have our history, our traditions, stemming back 2000 years, which form the matrix surrounding these various documents and including "the Bible" from which we can also study and learn from.

So while it is good to remember and commemorate Luther and the Reformation, A NECESSARY BREAK IN THE JUGGERNAUT OF THE CHURCH IN THE 16TH CENTURY, as Pope Francis himself pointed out when he went to Sweden, it is nothing to CELEBRATE ... but something to COMMEMORATE. Because it too was an exaggeration.

We are now going to go into what is liturgically called "Ordinary Times" ... and each Sunday we will listen to various readings ... from the Tanak (Hebrew Old Testament), from Apostolic literature, and then from the "Memoirs" of the Apostles. Some things to remember.

First remember that these readings are NOT the Word of God. And maybe we should stop saying that in our liturgies. They are the words of human beings who are giving witness to their understanding of who God is, their recollection and memories of how God works, and what we are to do in response.

Second, each generation through the history of our faith have answered these questions for themselves. And so should we.

Third, we are to answer these questions for ourselves because besides the church, the past and tradition; besides the Books and the OT and the NT, there is a third source we need to turn to, and that is our own lived experiences; that is God working in our world and I believe that is the ultimate challenge that faces us. To realize that God IS IN FACT working in our world; that GOD IS ALIVE AND WELL; that GOD IS WITH US today.

Do you believe it!? This is our challenge; this is our call to faith - to believe that God is working in our world, with us, NOW!

WHO WAS JESUS? WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY? AND WHAT AM I and WE TO DO? We can use the past answers given by other groups; we can use the words contained in the writings of former believers; but in the end we must come up with OUR answers to these questions.

So in this “Ordinary” Time, as you listen to the various readings on each of the Sundays, reflect on how they are answering these three questions and then on how they can help you and us to answer these questions for us and ourselves.